

Bad times are rapidly being replaced by dry desperation. Hay trucks are now common sights, lurking on the vacant lots, awaiting victims to fall for the expensive baled merchandise. Dry, dust-filled winds shade the sun. Every pickup you see is loaded with one form of livestock feed or the other.

Participants in the feed and feeding cycle are coming under attention to the degree that even the endless comments on the weather are being interrupted.

Feed dealers are offering to make court deposition that they'd be better off selling magazine subscriptions than peddling feed. Truckers hauling the feed claim a one cent rise in the price of spark plugs will put them out of business. Farmers, I hear, are lamenting the day they ever saw a combine. Ranchers, the instigators of the whole affair, are screaming that they are being strangled by feed bills.

All these complaints are true. Every time an old boy seeds a furrow, a new beetle or new fungus is standing by to leap on the first stalk. Feed millers can contract enough feed in September to bury Alaska six feet deep in the cubes, only to find that by February they don't have the money left to buy stamps to send out the bills.

Truckers get equally as bad a chousing. A freshman congressman who couldn't get the floor to put an ax on snuff boxes can steamroll through the legislative halls a trucking toll that'll chew the wheels off the biggest diesel in the state.

Herders, as you well know, are whipped after they buy their first sack. We spend the winter scattering feed and most of the spring burning the carcasses of the very animals that the feed was supposed to save.

From any angle, the entire process should be outlawed by every level of government. Politicians seem to be hell-bent on protecting their subjects from harm. How have they overlooked the certain self destruction that has been wrought by feeding livestock? Why didn't these service-bound worthies forbid the manufacturing of cottonseed meal before every four-legged beast in the pasturelands developed an addiction to the substance? If the polls are such high and mighty guardians of the welfare of the nation, then why didn't they take the time and effort to put livestock feed in the dangerous drug acts?

Here on this ranch the feed situation has grown so critical that I ordered the fellow making our cubes to start using our wool clippings as filler. As it was, I suspect he was having to add old shoe laces and discarded newspaper for the fiber content.

I think it's going to work. San Angelo is going to recycle sewage water. There's no reason why these old ewes can't learn to stomach lanolin if the city folks can drink skimmed secondhand water. It'll do these sheep good to discover that they don't have to have a diet made up entirely of imported groceries. Native sheep ought to have to eat some of the local products. Eastern woolen mills aren't going to buy it, so I don't see one reason why we shouldn't strive to find ways to dispose of wool.

I can already guess that nutritionists are going to oppose my plan on the grounds that it'll start cannibalism among the flocks. Some threat that'll be! Nothing, other than rain, could be of more immediate benefit to sheepmen than a varmint or parasite that'd clean up the wool clip before shearing time. Herders rejoice at the sight of a slipped-wool sheep. Outsiders would be more understanding of the problem if they had to pay their barber bill from the hair he peeled off their heads.

This drouth or any drouth isn't going to cure the feeders and the feed pushers. Ranching and its related fields are a disease. Contract bridge players and golf fiends can be reformed by getting their minds on whiskey and women. Gardening fanatics and incurable stamp collectors can be dried out in beer joints or pool halls. Foolish mountain climbers and aimless explorers, I've been told, can be shown a new life at the racetracks. But once a man gets to having anything to do with livestock, he's as hopelessly hooked on that as a bat is on eating mosquitos. All things considered, I actually believe a bat would be easier to deal with.